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# SOMERSET MAUGHAM

By JOHN BROPHY

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PUBLISHED FOR  
THE BRITISH COUNCIL  
and the NATIONAL BOOK LEAGUE  
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Somerset Maugham, who was born in 1874, is, and has for many decades been, among the most popular authors writing in English. His fame is international—as a dramatist, a novelist, and as a short story writer. He is a man who, as he has shown in his autobiographical works, particularly in *The Summing Up*, has from his earliest days been thoughtful for his craft.

John Brophy brings to his survey of Maugham's work great experience as a writer. He first made his reputation in the 1930's with *Waterfront*, a novel about a poor family in Liverpool overtaken by calamity when the father, who deserted them years before, returns unexpectedly. The prison scene in this was at once singled out as one of the most notable achievements in contemporary fiction. In his latest novel, *Turn the Key Softly*, he again tackles the theme of imprisonment, but with significant differences: the setting is London, the prisoners are women, and they are observed immediately after release, during their first day of freedom. In both books, although seventeen years separates their publication dates, there can be observed the same distinctive blending of compassionate insight with precise, unextenuated realism.

Mr. Brophy was born in Liverpool and spent most of his childhood there, with interludes in Ireland, until he enlisted in 1914 at the age of fourteen. He made a career in business before he settled to professional authorship. He has written several out-of-the-ordinary non-fiction books, including *The Human Face, Body and Soul*, and *The Mind's Eye*, and he was at one time chief critic of fiction to the *Daily Telegraph* and *Time and Tide*. He belongs to no school of writing, and is as independent in his creative work as in his critical judgements.

*Bibliographical Series*  
*of Supplements to 'British Book News'*



GENERAL EDITOR  
T. O. Beachcroft





W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

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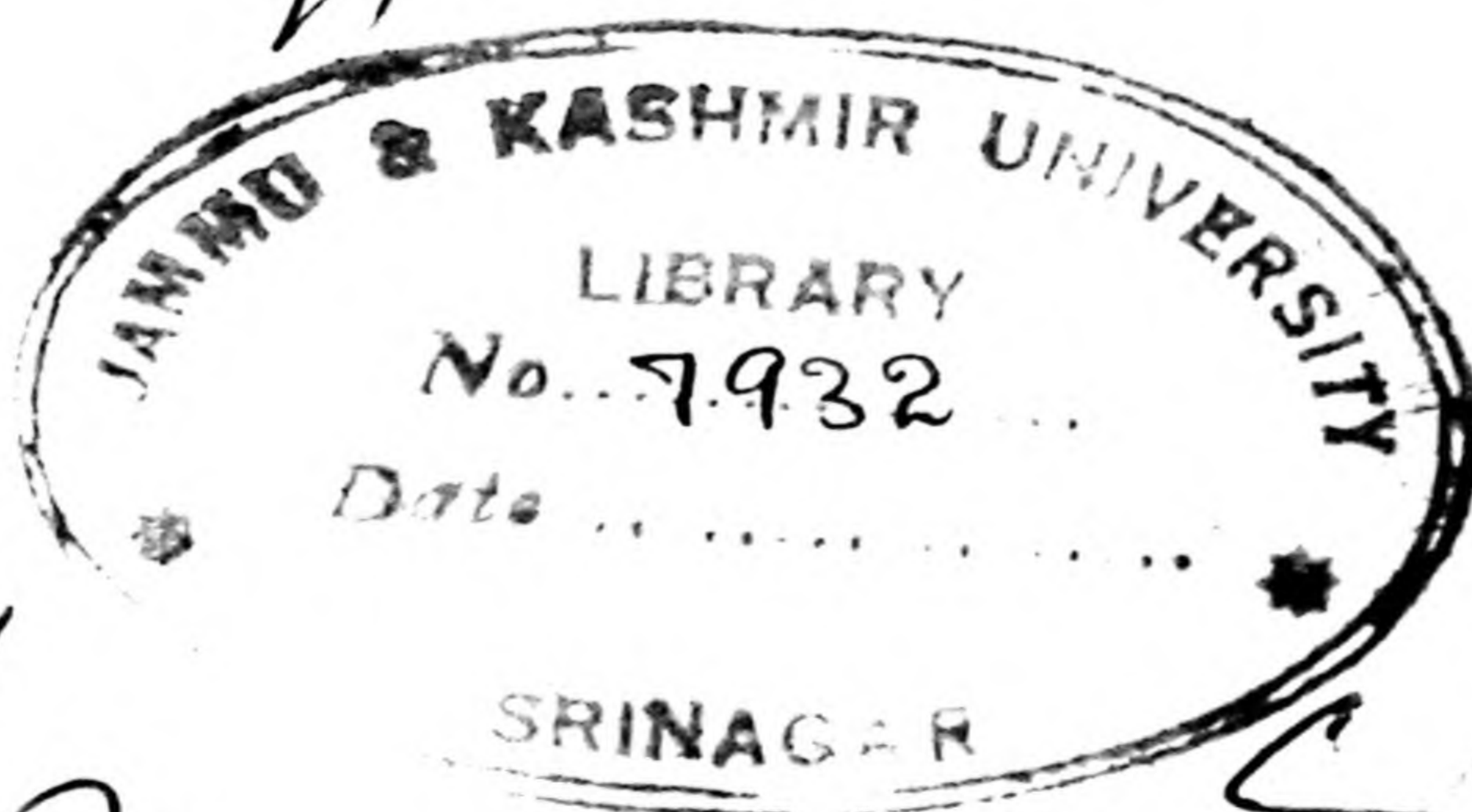


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# CONTENTS

SOMERSET MAUGHAM	<i>page</i> 7
COLOPHON	36
SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY	37
INDEX OF SHORT STORIES AND SKETCHES	42





## SOMERSET MAUGHAM

THE literary career of William Somerset Maugham, whose first book was published when he was twenty-three years old, extends over more than half a century. This achievement, rare in itself, becomes still more remarkable when it is realized that he has earned a high reputation in four distinct media, the novel, the short story, the stage play, and the sound film—lately he has co-operated so intimately in the adaptation of some of his stories for the cinema that he has appeared on the screen as a visible and audible introducer and commentator. Nor is this the full extent of his versatility, for he has published books of travel and of autobiography, and has essayed, in prefaces to his own volumes of fiction and in *A Writer's Notebook*, critical pronouncements upon literature and personal assessments of religious and philosophical doctrines.

To say that Maugham's work spans three literary generations, and embraces almost every form of the literary craft except poetry, still does not exhaust its versatility. He has the exceedingly rare distinction of commanding the interest of all kinds of readers. In England (and even more acrimoniously, perhaps, in the United States, where Maugham's reputation is at least as high as in his own country) the two sections of the general public known as the intellectual and the popular, or highbrow and lowbrow, usually remain not only distinct but deliberately far apart. Such is the snobbery and inverted snobbery of these two bodies that one will very often turn from a writer the moment it realizes that the other admires him. Yet Maugham draws his readers from both sections of the available public and has retained their interest for half a century. In general, it is only the august dead, the English classic authors—and only a minority of those—who maintain an equal appeal to both highbrow and lowbrow. Bernard Shaw, it is true, has beguiled everyone, highbrow and low, to enter the theatre and the cinema : but it is doubtful if Shaw ever persuaded large numbers to read his Prefaces or his novels. Maugham,



on the other hand, reaches a twofold public whatever the medium he attempts. Shaw rivals Maugham in length of writing career but his hold depends on his remaining from first to last the same brilliant and highly individual dramatist. Maugham has adapted himself not only to several media but to many changes of fashion. The manifestation of his individuality has varied, as Shaw's never did, to accord with new developments of taste and manners. It is not surprising, therefore, that we should find a sharp contrast in style and outlook between Maugham's early and late work. If *Liza of Lambeth* can be classed as a typical Late Victorian novel, the play *Lady Frederick* is a comedy of manners no less typically Edwardian. Changing again, he wrote during the 1920s such plays of disillusionment as *The Circle* and *Our Betters* for the 'sophisticated' theatre-goers of that post-war period. By the 1930s he was producing novels, still 'sophisticated' but, as the mental climate had altered, somewhat less febrile and flimsy, while *The Razor's Edge*, published in 1944 and later filmed, made conforming gestures towards a kind of unattached mysticism then coming into literary fashion.

In France, not only is the intellectual ravine between highbrow and lowbrow narrower, but writers, as writers, are held in higher esteem and arouse a more intense interest. Maugham has often drawn attention to this, for France is a recurring if not a constant preoccupation with him. The settings of many of his stories are in France. His dialogue is often French, although usually it is translated, phrase for phrase, so that his less educated readers may not feel excluded. He confesses to French influence on his work and acknowledges certain French writers, Maupassant in particular, as the masters from whom he has learned much of his trade.

It was France that educated me, France that taught me to value beauty, distinction, wit and good sense, France that taught me to write.

Maugham has given to many English and American



readers who are not by temperament or education disposed to pursue such an inquiry direct, some knowledge and appreciation of French manners and ways of thought. The French in turn have honoured Maugham and in much the same way as they honour their own successful writers. He holds an honorary Doctorate of Laws from the University of Toulouse and is a Commander of the Legion of Honour. Englishmen who count themselves intellectuals often tend to be obsequious towards France, and Maugham's francophile professions may have been a decisive element in inducing Mr. Cyril Connolly to describe him, in the columns of the intellectual *New Statesman*, as 'the greatest living short-story writer' and—without reserve or qualification, 'a great writer'. Such praise from such a quarter is probably sufficient in itself to secure for Maugham an important place in those histories of literature in which the historian, having no substantial judgements of his own to offer, plays safe by chronicling the assessments of writers made by the most influential among their contemporary critics—and so forestalls and perhaps prejudices the 'verdict of posterity'.

As Somerset Maugham is difficult to classify either by the literary forms he uses or by the kind of reader he engages, it may be worth while trying another approach. If we can locate something essential, characteristic, and significant in his attitude to his own work we may be better able to understand the seemingly arbitrary ambivalence of his success. One of the most widely practical revelations made by Sigmund Freud is that in human behaviour a revealing importance often pertains to what looks like accident. It is therefore quite possible that the title of a book may be by no means irrelevant to an analytic examination of its content.

In 1940 Maugham published a collection of ten short stories which he called *The Mixture As Before*. The first conclusion to be drawn from the choice of this title is obvious: it points to an author who is consciously willing to write to



a formula once he is convinced it is a successful formula in the sense of 'giving the public what it wants'. Such an attitude is undoubtedly to be discerned in Maugham. His most easily recognized quality is the professional virtue, the professional requisite, of being easily readable. Highbrows would need to be snobbish indeed to prefer hard going to smooth for its own sake, although there exists among them a minority willing to take up and defend such an attitude. With such people Maugham has had his tiffs. A record of one such encounter is to be found in the preface to *The Mixture As Before*, where he vindicates his choice of title and wields the 'professional' attitude as a modestly effective weapon against his accusers. He begins :

When my last volume of short stories was published *The Times* headed their review of it with the title *The Mixture As Before*. This of course was meant in a depreciatory sense, but I did not take it as such and so I have made so bold as to use it for the collection which I am now inviting the public to read. After pursuing the art of fiction for over forty years I have a notion that I know a good deal more about it than most people.

He continues with a reference to authors whom he has seen like 'a number of bright stars creep shyly over the horizon' and who then burn out, and concludes that a writer

must be content, he must rejoice even, if a new work which he tenders to the approbation of the public shows no falling off, if, in fact, it can truthfully be called *The Mixture As Before*.

No one therefore need be surprised to find professionalism pervading the manner which Maugham adopts for his stories, and often it will seem that the matter—the settings, themes, and situations—has also been chosen with professional care to give the public what it has already shown it likes.

The phrase 'the mixture as before' is a piece of jargon belonging not to the literary but to the medical profession. Somerset Maugham spent five years (from 1892, which is when he began, in the notebooks, his writing career) as a medical student at St. Thomas's Hospital in London.



Among the qualifications which follow his name in books of reference are Member of the Royal College of Surgeons and Licentiate of the Royal College of Physicians. These biographical data afford a clue to a sustained interest, an attitude of mind persisting over many years, which almost certainly played its part in the choice of a title for a volume of short stories published as late as 1940. More than that : this attitude may be regarded as an integral and controlling part of his personality as revealed in his writings. It is not so much cynicism as clinicalism ; a dispassionate and systematic habit of observation more often found among descriptive scientists than among creative artists.

This clinical attitude should not be regarded merely as a by-product of Maugham's medical training. It is almost certainly temperamental, inherent in the man, and nourished by his admiration for the ' objective ' school of French literature and especially for Maupassant, who was himself a literary disciple, and indeed a pupil, of Flaubert. Clinicalism is closely related to those religious and philosophic opinions which Maugham has expounded from time to time with some explicitness, and it is an outlook often fostered, if not produced, by that habit of life which is commonly and conveniently called cosmopolitan. To be an accepted cosmopolitan it is not sufficient to travel : the wanderings must be conducted from several bases, those bases must be large capital cities, and the traveller must be on intimate terms with their most influential communities. Maugham appears to fulfil the conditions. Born of English parents and schooled at Canterbury, he studied at the University of Heidelberg before taking up medicine in London. Since then, his travels have been frequent and extensive, taking him to India, Burma, Siam, Malaya, China, the South Seas, Russia, and the Americas—but his homes have been made in London, Paris, and New York, and on the French Riviera which forms a kind of seasonal annexe to those three capitals.

His travels nourish his writings. A cosmopolitan society



supplies the background for much of his fiction and his plays, but he is as much at ease with the outpost life of British and French colonies and with remote mission stations—there must be a huge number of people whose only knowledge of missionaries is derived from perhaps the most famous of all Maugham short stories, *Rain*.

Cosmopolitan insouciance, admiration for French culture and Eastern travel, however, are permitted to affect him only to a certain degree, a certain depth. Like the obstinate hero of the Gilbert and Sullivan song, he remains almost self-consciously an Englishman. Indeed, he discourses in *The Razor's Edge* (where the narrator in the first person goes by the name of 'Mr. Maugham') on the qualms with which he writes about characters whose nationality is not his own. The author's insistence, during the opening passages, that *The Razor's Edge* is an Englishman's report of what he saw happen among American characters, whom he does not claim to understand, goes a long way to establish the objective manner of this novel, makes it, in fact, clinical. *A Writer's Notebook*, also, offers a cautionary statement :

The student of a country other than his own can hope to know comparatively few of its inhabitants, nor with the difference of language and of culture will he even after many years become intimate with them. Even with the English and American . . . there can be no real understanding.

Yet Maugham maintains, again in *A Writer's Notebook*, that it is to the advantage of both writer and student to have travelled widely. His argument is that while many spinsters have stayed at home to write there is only one Jane Austen. He makes the witty and sensible observation :

To know a foreign country at all you must not only have lived in it and in your own, but also lived in at least one other. Arnold Bennett has never ceased to believe it a peculiar distinction of the French that they make their breakfast off coffee and rolls.

The acquaintance which he has obtained through travel with a diversity of standards, manners, and morals aptly



serves the clinicalism of his writing. Maugham displays surprise, inexhaustible surprise, at the vagaries of his characters. Shock, however, is not admitted. He comments upon the facts he reports ; but he does little in the way of arranging them and he refuses to be startled into passing judgement. It is this same refusal of judgement which characterizes Maugham the traveller. Foreign ways are different from, but he will not admit them to be better or worse than, ways nearer home. He remarks that Christians, had they been born and bred elsewhere, would be just as firm in Mohammedan or Buddhist convictions. Even phenomena which at first appear superior to Christianity, like those Indian beliefs on which *The Razor's Edge* is a commentary, turn out before long to be much the same in Maugham's estimation.

For a while I was attracted to the Hindu conception of that mysterious neuter which is existence . . . and I should be more inclined to believe in that than in any other God that human wishes have devised. But I think it no more than an impressive fantasy.

The conclusion of Maugham's observations at home and abroad seems to be that experience is too diverse for any universal conclusion at all to be drawn from it. There remains only the impressiveness of each separate fact, and such facts furnish Maugham the professional writer with matter to exercise his story-telling gifts upon. Only the stay-at-home who restricts himself to facts suitable for his stay-at-home philosophic system can formulate a unified belief. Diversity of experience automatically brings all values into question.

The Pathan who has killed his man is not conscience-stricken, nor is the Corsican who has murdered his enemy in vendetta. The scrupulous Englishman will hesitate to lie ; the Spaniard, no less scrupulous, will not think twice about it.

In view of these variations on a recurring theme, it may not be unfair to conclude that the wide world, as seen at



first hand by Maugham, is not unlike a vast extension of the Medical School of St. Thomas's. Conscience is a phenomenon to be described ; belief is something to be documented in a case history. The same sort of aloofness from emotion and judgement is aroused by an acquaintance with geography as by the study of human anatomy.

My soul would have been quite different if I had not stammered or if I had been four or five inches taller ; I am slightly prognathous ; in my childhood they did not know that this could be remedied by a gold band worn while the jaw is still malleable ; if they had, my countenance would have borne a different cast, the reaction toward me of my fellows would have been different and therefore my disposition, my attitude to them, would have been different too. But what sort of thing is this soul that can be modified by a dental apparatus ?

Belief may be reported among, and by the same methods as, other phenomena, and is by no means an essential element in Maugham's concept of human nature. He often ignores it completely, and in many of his novels his invented people make their way from cover to cover without disclosing one hint of their attitude towards universals. Nor has he attempted to do what Shaw cannot help doing even in his most frivolous plays : creating character and doctrine as an inextricable whole and setting them up, with the emotional and the intellectual, personal and abstract, indistinguishably mixed, to argue with each other but also to sustain subtle relationships. Maugham does indeed discuss belief in *A Writer's Notebook* and he deals with it also in some novels, notably *Of Human Bondage* and *The Razor's Edge*.

He allows himself much freedom of comment, even to the point of sometimes compromising his clinical detachment. In *Journey Without Maps* Graham Greene writes that Maugham 'has done more than anyone to stamp the idea of the repressed prudish man of God on the popular imagination. . . . *Rain* has impressed the image of Mr. Davidson over the missionary field : the Mr. Davidson who said of his work in the Pacific Islands : " When we went there they



had no sense of sin at all. They broke the commandments one after the other and never knew they were doing wrong. And I think that was the most difficult part of my work, to instil into the natives the sense of sin": the Mr. Davidson who slept with the prostitute, Sadie Thompson, and then killed himself.' It is not only missionaries, however, but clergymen in general who seem to excite in Maugham an animosity that makes one wonder whether his clinicalism is truly dispassionate or a detached manner covering strong prejudices. There is *The Verger*, a short story filmed in *Trio*, to be taken into account, and the early comedy or farce, *Loaves and Fishes*, and above all the novel, *Of Human Bondage*, published in 1915 and often spoken of as his master work.

*Of Human Bondage* tells the story of Philip Carey's life from boyhood until he is thirty. It opens with the death of his mother—his father is already dead—and his adoption, as a quiet, shy small boy with a club-foot, by his uncle, who is vicar of Blackstable. Philip goes to a school where the sons of gentlemen are educated; he rebels against the ecclesiastical career his uncle intends for him and studies painting in Paris until he discovers that he is devoid of genius. Then, after struggling against poverty and a destructive passion for a feckless girl, he settles down as a doctor and the husband of another girl, considerably younger than himself, whom he loves but is not in love with.

The character of the vicar is presented unsympathetically. He neglects his ecclesiastical duties; he is mean and avaricious; in the matter of belief, he is at once dogmatic and slipshod—on the whole he prefers not to mention God; and he is so selfish that, under pretence of training the boy, he treats Philip with extreme severity, and sits egotistically by while his wife wears herself out making his life comfortable. In the end he dies, curiously and dispassionately watched by the adult Philip. He has become a valetudinarian monster, terrified and squealing; his terror of death is not in the least assuaged by the religion he has spent his life preaching.



There is an episode in Philip's childhood to which Maugham is probably referring when he says that, in *Of Human Bondage*, he tried to describe his own loss of religious faith. Philip discovers that his uncle insists upon the literal belief that faith can remove mountains. He prays that his club-foot may be cured before the beginning of the next school term. On the appointed day he wakes up confidently expecting to find himself cured—but there is no change in his foot. At breakfast he asks, in a concealed and hypothetical form, for an explanation. The vicar explains that a failure to remove the mountain must be due to lack of faith. Philip concludes: 'I suppose no one ever has enough faith.' He makes a comparison between the biblical text and something his nurse has told him, that a bird can be caught if salt is put on its tail. It is only after experiment that Philip has discovered that one never comes close enough to the bird to try. So, he decides, it must be with faith: 'He thought his uncle had been playing a practical joke on him.'

On the face of it, all this looks to be very much the same sort of judgement as Samuel Butler passed upon clerical hypocrisy in *The Way of All Flesh*. In fact, however, Butler and Maugham are poles apart. Maugham's is not judgement at all. In this context, judgement would imply setting up a new standard in place of that which is to be demolished. If it is wrong to spread lies, and wrong to be a hypocrite, it is wrong only because truth and sincerity are right. If clergymen are hypocrites, it is not Christianity which has failed but clergymen; and you can judge them to have failed only if you apply to them the Christian or some other relevant standard of right and wrong. Butler was more deeply embittered by—and more prejudiced by—the particular wrongs which affected his own life than Maugham: but he did recognize that wrong is wrong only if there exists something else which is right, and he put forward a positive doctrine in place of the one he negated. *The Way of All Flesh* is inspired by violent anger against the clergy because



they offended Butler's moral sense. The hypocrisy reported in *Of Human Bondage* (which on the whole is a less biased report than Butler's) arouses not so much indignation as distaste. So long as Philip is a boy, it is true, the reader's sympathy is called into play and the book is moving. The boy is put upon, because it is in the nature of childhood that he should take on trust the falsehoods told him by his elders, too lazy rather than too wicked to offer him an adult explanation. He is cheated and therefore pitiable. When, however, Philip grows up, he becomes free to accept or reject Christian doctrine. He rejects it, with surprise at the foolishness of believers, but with no sense of shock, no moral indignation. Convinced that religion is nonsense, he feels no obligation to disabuse others of what he regards as mere fantasy, even when he observes that on their deathbeds it fails to console them. Maugham notes, as it were, in a casebook: this man is dying of pneumonia because, curious creature, he insists on going out in the rain. The fact is reported and the comment added without passion, without even concern. Samuel Butler, by contrast, professes social medicine. He is appalled that the contagion should be spread. He denounces religion in a satire so hot that it scorches and discomfits not only the object of his scorn but the reader and himself. He would have the churches pulled down and sterilized; and he has already planned the temples to the Life Force which should be built in their place.

Maugham limits himself to the clinical practice of describing the case. There is nothing of the physician about him. He never suggests a cure or the possibility of a cure or even that a cure might be desirable. Indeed, the difficulty of making effective cures, even in the physical and medical sense, is stressed in *Liza of Lambeth* and *Of Human Bondage*. The physician may deliver the children of the poor—Maugham wrote *Liza of Lambeth* when his study of obstetrics took him to the slums for that purpose—but he cannot begin to cure poverty and ignorance. When



Maugham gave up, apart from his Army service, in 1914, the profession of medicine and adopted, *par excellence*, the manner of the professional writer, he may be said to have taken up also the career, from which he has not deviated, of pathologist of human behaviour.

The clinical attitude is maintained, although precariously because of an emotional intrusion, in what is (so far as a contemporary can judge) Maugham's most satisfying novel, *Cakes and Ale*. Of all his work outside the theatre, this ought to have the best chance of giving pleasure to future generations. Technically it is, although discursive, a very deft construction, and especially notable for the way the narrative slides back to different episodes in the past without forfeiting either lucidity or impetus. It is a *tour de force* of narrative complexity, not easy to match except among the works of Henry James, a writer with whom Maugham has almost nothing in common. The complexity of structure arises from the fact that three of the four principal characters are novelists, that is to say professional story-tellers, and one of them, Ashenden-Maugham, recounts the whole action as a reminiscence. After the death of Edward Driffield, who achieved a legendary fame in his old age, his widow authorizes a younger novelist, Alroy Kear, to write his biography. Kear comes for information to Ashenden, who, as a boy, and later as a medical student, had known Driffield in the days of his obscurity and had also known his first wife. Kear obtains more than he bargains for. In fact, the truth about Driffield is unwelcome both to his widow and to his biographer. Yet as Ashenden discloses it, by carefully timed instalments, this truth provides the substance for the most moving and persuasive of all the Maugham stories.

In *Cakes and Ale* the colloquial style of narration is seen to the utmost advantage, and page by page the novel reads as if one were indeed listening to a professional writer recounting over an intimate dinner table an experience in which he himself had been involved. The illusion, and with it the essential credibility, is almost flawless from start to finish.



Maugham's achievement is not, however, merely technical. In this novel, neither professionalism nor clinical detachment has been able to stifle an unwonted warmth, an admiring affection, in the author. It is directed towards Driffield in the first place, and successfully demonstrates the proposition that behind the venerable lay-figure created by his literary admirers is a human being. But most of all the author's affection and admiration go out to Rosie, Driffield's first wife. Sexually promiscuous but without vice, devoid of malice and meanness, animal but always giving her heart along with her body, Rosie is the most fully realized character in the book. Her range of humanity is narrow but rich. If everyone were like her, civilization would never have happened except in a material sense, but she has virtues which civilization often extirpates. She and Liza in *Liza of Lambeth* are almost the only women among Maugham's major characters who come out well from his clinical examination. Her animal heat and vivacity seem to infect her creator, and in *Cakes and Ale* the narrative is gradually pervaded by Rosie's easy-going tolerance, so that Alroy Kear, whose self-deceptions and shameless fostering of his own career are sardonically recorded in the opening chapters, before the end has mellowed into a figure of fun.

Some part of the immediate success of *Cakes and Ale*, when it was published in 1930, was doubtless due to rumours and gossip. Driffield, it was alleged, was a portrait of Thomas Hardy, then recently dead. The only comment that need now be made is that while there may be points of resemblance between the literary lives of the real and the fictitious novelist, there is no evidence of any likeness in their private lives. It seems reasonable to conclude that, while Maugham may have used as a starting-point certain circumstances which suited his purpose, he grafted on to them, by processes familiar to all novelists, other circumstances, motives, and interpretations wholly or partly invented. Gossip, however, concerned itself even more strenuously with Alroy Kear. He was identified with Hugh



Walpole, very much alive and very successful at the time the book was first published. Walpole has been dead now for ten years, and it is surely permissible to admit that many would see in Alroy Kear not perhaps a full-length portrait, but a lively sketch distinctly recognizable.

Truth may sometimes be stranger than fiction, but it is often unsorted, unarranged, shapeless, its significance obscure. Story-tellers, therefore, who present fiction in the guise of fact expose themselves to a serious danger. In Maugham's own words :

Unless a novelist makes you believe in him he is done, and yet if he is entirely believable he may very well be dull.

It is one of Maugham's distinctions that he presents his stories as matters of fact, with the minimum sacrifice of verisimilitude, and yet makes them readable. He achieves this without relying on the detective story's device of mystification. Indeed, Maugham's stories often do without suspense, which is commonly regarded as an essential element of any good story. Nor does he rely upon topicality, as the political reporter does, or upon argument as the philosopher does, both of whom can create a kind of indirect suspense because the conclusion of their narrative may affect the reader's personal life. In a Maugham story the reader's self-interest is not involved : nothing is presupposed in the reader but a potential interest in the diverse conventions and oddities of human beings.

It might seem that an approach so lacking in urgency would neither arouse nor sustain the interest of those readers determined to seek out and study the best literature. It is because, paradoxically perhaps, this is demonstrably untrue, because Maugham is not merely one of the most readable but also one of the most widely read of contemporary authors, that the presentation of his material demands closer analysis. A distinction must at once be made between the selection of his material and the way it is offered to the reader. Maugham is no physician of human



troubles ; he never prescribes : but in documenting the facts of the case he exercises an accomplished bedside manner. He observes clinically, yet in making acceptable what he observes he draws on most of the attention-compelling devices of the professional writer. An understanding of this professionalism in Maugham's manner ought to illuminate how his matter is made acceptable to both highbrow and lowbrow readers.

Maugham has never claimed for himself, although some of his admirers have claimed it for him, that he is a stylist. Indeed he remarks upon his difficulty in making his style presentable at all ; in his comment upon the notebook entries for 1901, he says that he was at that time 'aware that my own [style] was flat, plain, and pedestrian'. It was with the intention of improving it, he remarks, that he carefully read Milton and Jeremy Taylor, comments upon whom are included in the notes ; and it says much for Maugham's honesty and courage that he has also printed various over-written conceits which he jotted down for the same purpose. (He also traces in the same quotations the influence of Oscar Wilde's *Salome*) :

The Wind sang to himself like a strong-limbed ploughboy as he marches easily through the country.

The wind sighed through the pine trees with the pitifulness of a girl sighing for a love that was dead.

The sad, stormy night of eternal damnation.

In the sun the wet leaves glistened like emeralds, meretricious stones which might fitly deck the pompous depravity of a royal courtesan.

Little or nothing of this sort, however, has been allowed to escape from the notebooks into Maugham's other books. There, the writing would indeed be 'flat, plain, and pedestrian', did it not flow. It is notably lacking in metaphors and similes, and those which do occur are seldom fresh enough to illuminate. Yet this very evenness is partly



responsible for the flow of the narrative. Never a phrase pulls up the reader to admire its beauty or penetration ; the steady succession of familiar words in a familiar order never stimulates the reader's own fancy ; Maugham's style can lead nowhere except straight ahead into the story.

Besides its evenness, the style has an informality which makes for unimpeded reading. The sentences are usually short and never complex, most of them connected by the simple relations of ' and ' or ' but '. The diction is similarly informal : people ' drop in ' to tea and are described as ' nobody's fool '. In fact, Maugham is one of the very few contemporary serious writers to make colloquialisms the very substance of narrative. He does not reserve them—as, for example, Evelyn Waugh reserves them—for dialogue and quasi-reported speech, where they most economically and vividly establish scene, society, or period : nor does he use them, as Henry James occasionally and surprisingly does, to throw a piercing sidelight upon the characters. (Maugham seems, incidentally, in the first chapter of *The Razor's Edge*, to have misunderstood James's use of slang.) From Maugham characters, the reader receives the impression that all alike either ' get on like a house on fire ' or don't ' care a row of pins ' for each other.

Maugham, indeed, cultivates informality of phrase to such an extent that his narrative prose is often cluttered with clichés. *The Razor's Edge*, which may be considered his most serious novel, contains ' sardonic grins ', ' sinking hearts ', and ' disparaging glances ' ; while at the end of a short story called *Lord Mountdrago* (a virtuoso essay in the supernatural, a very out-of-the-way subject for Maugham) clichés trip each other up.

It was true ; he shivered as of an ague. With some kind of spiritual sense he seemed to envisage a bleak, a horrible void. The dark night of the soul engulfed him, and he felt a strange, primeval terror of he knew not what.

The question must now be faced—is the persistent use of hackneyed phrases a conscious literary device or a mental



disability of which Maugham is unable to rid himself? The likeliest answer is that it is a disability turned to profit. In *A Writer's Notebook*, one entry, written in 1941 when he was in the United States, deals with the subjunctive mood. Maugham notices that many Americans use the subjunctive in writing although they avoid it in speech. This he considers pedantic. The subjunctive is, he says, 'in its death throes, and the best thing to do is put it out of its misery as soon as possible'. He continues with a discussion of particular words, in which he opts for the noun 'lunch' in preference to 'luncheon', 'bus' rather than 'omnibus' and (here with right indisputably and wittily on his side) 'cab' rather than 'cabriolet'. In between these discussions comes this revealing sentence :

After all, writing is founded on common speech, and there's no reason to forget that out of the slovenliness and incorrectness which offend the pedagogue apt phrases and picturesque idioms arise.

Conceding that written language derives from spoken, the fact remains that in highly civilized countries it cannot be limited to the function of recording speech but evolves its own distinctive character. This is because it communicates meaning differently and in different circumstances. Written language is intended for the eye in the first place and only indirectly for the ear which, in a fully equipped reader, catches the sound of the words marching through the silence of the attentive mind. The weakness of Maugham's argument is given away in the phrase 'slovenliness and incorrectness', for the assumption seems to be that writing is founded on the least common denominator of speech. 'Luncheon' and 'omnibus', being particular instances, are obviously of minor importance. Contemporary idiom is still undecided about them, although speech inclines, as Maugham says, toward the shorter forms. They are words about which good contemporary writers may, each with justice, differ. It is interesting that Virginia Woolf, for



example, preferred 'omnibus', and Evelyn Waugh, although so much younger than Maugham, uses 'luncheon'. The question of whether and to what extent the commonest colloquialisms may legitimately be employed in narrative or expository prose is so fundamental that it would be rash to assume that an author's choice is caused by mere personal fastidiousness or snobbery. There is a principle involved, and it is intimately connected with the continuity of English literature.

By avoiding obvious colloquialisms, in narrative, both Evelyn Waugh and Virginia Woolf, to continue with the same convenient examples, write prose which, apart from the chosen subject and the impact upon it of each writer's individuality, might well have been written either by Jane Austen or by Samuel Butler. Nothing ages more quickly than what Maugham calls the 'apt phrases and picturesque idioms' of contemporary spoken language. Whereas in dialogue they may serve to vivify character and situation, if they are taken up into the narrative of a work of fiction they are apt to turn the whole into a period piece the moment they themselves brown at the edges. A novelist who uses such phrases sparingly in his narrative gives himself the chance of writing durable English prose.

Maugham, who perhaps has never possessed the equipment necessary for a distinguished writer of prose, does not allow himself this opportunity. He is outside the English tradition. The essence of his narrative style lies in his use of words not as instruments written and read but as instruments spoken and heard. He is less a writer than a talker—a view of him which is supported by the character of his prose and the construction of his novels and stories, and which is consonant with his success in the necessarily oral conventions of the theatre and cinema.

This is not to suggest that his writing is unconsidered. Indeed he says: 'One fusses about style. One tries to write better. . . . One sweats one's guts out.' The same passage, however, hints at the predominantly oral character of his



prose : ' One reads a sentence aloud to see that it sounds well.' Yet, for all its considered colloquialisms, Maugham's style hardly conveys a realistic impression of ordinary speech : it is too often stilted or melodramatic. Only an almost incredibly pompous character, for example, could deliver the closing lines of *Lord Mountdrago* extempore : one can, however, imagine them, rehearsed, their effect precisely calculated, being spoken by a recognized raconteur to the guests at a house party who have asked to be diverted with a ghost story.

This flavour of carefully prepared talk persists through Maugham's work. His professional manner is discursive, even chatty.

' I have noticed,' he begins *Cakes and Ale*, ' that when someone asks for you on the telephone and, finding you out, leaves a message begging you to call him up the moment you come in, and it's important, the matter is more often important to him than to you.' For the opening of a novel, this sentence might be thought too loose in syntax, and the observation it embodies insufficiently witty and insufficiently relevant to the whole subject. Yet it is a compelling opening. Its compulsion lies, however, in its being a talker's opening : it is as if conversation had reached a point where the generalization can be aptly brought out. The audience is given a hint that a story is to follow. After another sentence elaborating the first (during which subsidiary conversations round the table peter out, and anyone who did not catch the first sentence gathers the gist from, and finds his attention caught by, the second) the talker is ready to continue with the story-teller's ' So . . . ' : ' So when I got back to my lodgings . . . and was told . . . that Mr. Alroy Kear wished me to ring him up at once . . . '

Another favourite device of the talker is to begin not with a generalization but with a challenge to himself. He opens by telling you the end of his story, a surprising end. His task thereafter is to fill in plausibly the beginning and middle. It is a one-man performance, since the challenge



comes from the talker himself, on his own ground, the answer premeditated.

In applying this device to story-telling the talker's virtuosity is exercised to the full. Suspense is created not by the facts of the story but by the technique of its narration, by the deliberately courted risk that the middle may not suffice to cover the gap, and the whole story, in falling short, may fall flat. As anyone knows who has ever told a funny story, of all methods this is the most dangerous to the unskilful. Maugham, whose professional manner is that of a talker, often uses this device with expert confidence ; and success in it, because of the increased hazard, merits increased applause.

A short story called *The Lion's Skin*, in *The Mixture As Before*, exemplifies the form. It opens :

A good many people were shocked when they read that Captain Forestier had met his death in a forest fire when trying to save his wife's dog, which had been accidentally shut up in the house.

This is the surprising statement, although we realize it is surprising only because we are told that a good many people were shocked. The omission of introductory comment, the omission of an explanation of who Captain Forestier was, when and where he lived, these negative devices serve to persuade us that—like everyone else in the room listening to the story-teller—we were ourselves acquainted with Captain Forestier ; we, too, were shocked at the time and now need only to be reminded of his personality and death. The intimacy and immediacy of the manner persuade us into accepting a flat statement as a surprising one calculated to awaken curiosity.

Now if, using a freedom not available to listeners, which Maugham's readability makes it difficult for even a reader to apply, we turn to the last two pages of *The Lion's Skin*, we find that the end is substantially the same as the opening. Apart from a paragraph or two of coda, it simply



recounts in more detail the death described in the first sentence. Thus we must assume that in the body of the story Maugham has brought off the talker's feat of providing a plausible connexion between beginning and end, at the same time making it clear why Captain Forestier's death should be so surprising.

Forestier (an awkward choice of name for one destined to die because of a forest fire) is not a gentleman. He is living in affluence on the Riviera but he started as a page-boy. He plays the rôle of gentleman a little too perfectly. He deludes his acquaintances and, more particularly, his wife. His wife adores him—so much so that it was she who forced him into a marriage which, because she was rich and he poor, he had balked at, ostentatiously manifesting the scruples proper to a gentleman in such an embarrassing position. The one person whom Forestier does not deceive is Sir Frederick Hardy, a gentleman by birth. Unlike Forestier, however, Hardy possesses neither the manners nor the morals of a gentleman. On the night of the fire, when he is confronted with a problem to be solved only immediately and at the risk of his life, Forestier brings his years of playacting to a triumphant apotheosis by *being* the traditional gentleman. He lives up to his wife's ideal of him, and Sir Frederick is forced to admit to the widow that her husband was 'a very gallant gentleman'.

It is because so much attention is directed to the narration rather than to the matter narrated, that this is more a talker's than a writer's story. Maugham's verisimilitude does not aim at making the reader experience, as directly as possible, the emotions of the characters. There is no one in *The Lion's Skin* invested with this sort of reality, the sort which the reader can identify with his own. The dominant reality belongs to the narrator. The reader identifies himself not with any of the characters but with the audience.

Maugham's use of the first person is always of this kind. He is not much concerned with introspection and not at all with the stream of consciousness. His use of the first person



is worlds away from the rounded, revelatory 'I' of Joyce Cary in *The Horse's Mouth*. With Maugham, the first person is a means to a narrative end, a functional device strictly and deftly limited in scope, adopted because the same rule applies to stories presented in print as if they were spoken in intimate circumstances as to stories actually spoken at a dinner table: they are apt to seem more convincing if they are alleged to have happened to the teller or before his eyes. 'I beg the reader', writes Maugham in the preface to the collection *Altogether*, 'not to be deceived by the fact that a good many of these stories are told in the first person into thinking that they are experiences of my own. This is merely a device to gain verisimilitude'.

With a style so chatty, in a story presented as spoken, it would destroy verisimilitude to dispense with a narrator or to pretend that the 'I' was someone obviously not Somerset Maugham. Always in Maugham's work we perceive the suggestion of a narrator talking—he has recorded that *Rain* was originally written in the first person—and the most characteristic stories are explicitly related by a narrator who is more often than not a professional writer. In *The Razor's Edge* he bears Maugham's name. Elsewhere, notably in the stories of espionage called *Ashenden*, in *Cakes and Ale*, and in the story *Sanatorium*, the first person is the writer and 'humourist' Ashenden, whose first name is the same as Maugham's, the background of whose youth resembles Maugham's (and, incidentally, Philip's in *Of Human Bondage*) and who, Maugham tells us in the introduction to the film *Trio*, may be taken as a 'flattering' self-portrait. Ashenden, however, stands on the outer edge of the actions he narrates. He may mingle with the characters, even fall in love with some of them, but he does not influence the main course of their lives. The use of the first person as a story-telling device reaches its utmost complexity in one of the stories which was later filmed in *Quartet*, where there is both a first person narrator and an observer who relates the story, which concerns yet another group of people, to the narrator.



*The Lion's Skin* is one of several stories in which the narrator remains implicit and unidentified. Maugham uses the pronoun 'I' to carry along his story although no individual person emerges. Nevertheless, it is the 'I', the talker, in his limited, functional rôle, upon whom attention is focused from first to last—because he has issued the challenge to himself and the structure of the story depends on the way he carries out his self-chosen task. The narrator, and through him the author, does not set out to create, develop, and explore fully realized characters but to manipulate, like the pieces in a jig-saw puzzle, the essential ingredients, the contrasting—but ultimately complementary—conceptions of being-a-gentleman and not-being-a-gentleman, seeing-through-Forestier and not-seeing-through-Forestier. The restricted scope of the story that is to be told is quickly indicated, and it would disrupt this scope if the author were either to develop or to analyse any of the characters beyond the limits defined by their function in the jig-saw puzzle.

If we withdraw our minds for a moment at this point and make a comparison with the perceptible aims of one of the great masters of fiction—say with Dostoievski, Chekhov, or Henry James, or even the temporarily out of favour Thackeray—it will be difficult to avoid the conclusion that verisimilitude, as Maugham aims at and achieves it, is not only something different from the sense of reality which these masters convey but hostile to it. The two cannot exist together. Maugham's characters may possess verisimilitude, but they lack the volition and dynamics not only of flesh and blood but of the characters known to us through the creative imagination of the masters of modern fiction. They are smaller, less complex, less disturbing, and acceptable as depictions of human beings only within the convention imposed, while his story lasts, by an expert storyteller.

In the theatre also, the device of making and then answering a challenge is one which is apt to exact heavy penalties as the price of success. Maugham uses the device as a *tour*



*de force* in *Lady Frederick*. A young man is infatuated with the ageing Lady Frederick. The plot produces the challenge : he is to be compelled to lose his infatuation within a stated time. Lady Frederick undertakes the apparently impossible—she will disillusion him within the time limit. She succeeds, in a *bravura* passage of farce, by admitting him to the exaggerated and caricatured arcana of her toilette. Here, again, the characters have verisimilitude but no inward reality. Once described, they do not—they cannot—change, develop, or manifest any organic growth. The play succeeds because interest, suspense, and line-by-line amusement are wrought out of the deft manipulation of these simulacra of human beings. If Lady Frederick had been conceived as a real person, her sacrifice of her own vanity would come nearer to tragedy than to farce. Maugham has restricted his aim. He has brought off a brilliant comedy of manners, and possibly he admits that comedy of manners is the form best suited to his distinctive talents when he says, in estimating his chances of literary survival :

I think that one or two of my comedies may retain for some time a kind of pale life, for they are written in the tradition of English comedy and on that account may find a place in the long line that began with the Restoration dramatists and in the plays of Noel Coward continues to please.

Many of Maugham's plays 'date' quickly and yet bear revival well. They come fully to life on the stage, the physical presence of the players filling out the characterization, and under the 'period' detail the more lasting conventions of artificial comedy are almost always present. *Home and Beauty*, a frolic about a 1914-18 soldier, presumed dead, who returns to find his wife married to his best friend, and *Loaves and Fishes*, an imbroglio round the intrigues of a worldly clergyman, are both of them farcical in the sense that the fun, as it gathers pace, sweeps reality and responsibility away—but the farce never loses some satiric purpose. *The Circle* and *Our Betters*, dealing with the absurdities of



misbehaviour among the prosperous classes of their time (the 1920's) come nearer to the restraints of true comedy: in structure and conception, they remind one, with due differences, of the lighter work of the Viennese Schnitzler. *The Breadwinner*, about a stockbroker who grows bored with his luxury-loving wife and family and, to spite them, engineers his own financial ruin, belongs to the same class and period. Each of these five plays conforms to certain artifices of the theatre, and depends more on situation than on any subtlety or novelty in the exposition of character: but the situations are well invented, and their potential richnesses of humour fully exploited. Maugham, we may be reasonably confident, will long retain his place in the theatrical repertoire.

The argument that Maugham's professional manner is a talker's manner should help us to appreciate certain aspects of his style which at first sight are apt to appear disabling defects. His punctuation is inconsistent, sometimes indefensibly haphazard, and, although he cultivates short sentences, every now and then one of these will be found to be two sentences falsely linked by a comma. This is the way people speak, relying on intonation, vocal pauses, and emphases, to tidy up the disorder of their words. The talker's manner may also account for lapses of taste. Much can be discreetly spoken which would be offensive in writing. It is the similarity of Maugham's writing to speech which preserves from utter bad taste the buffoonery, in *Theatre*, of Julia's vain attempt to pick up a man in the Edgware Road, or Larry's mistake, in *The Razor's Edge*, in the identity of the woman with whom he is in bed.

Maugham notes: 'In a story as in a play you must make up your mind what your point is and stick to it like grim death.' The comparison is yet another cliché, and while the imperative 'must' no doubt emphasizes the practical value of this advice for many writers, what is enjoined seems to be a formula. Moreover, it is a formula which may well exclude subtlety and discourage characterization. There is



an implicit admission that in stories of this kind the characters are manipulated to make the author's point : they are not allowed to develop and make a point or points of their own. In assessing Maugham's achievements, it is necessary to establish the limits within which he works. His emphasis upon sticking to the 'point' in the management of a play or story is significant in both the choice of the word and the choice of the singular number. Consciously, or partly consciously, he appears to be limiting his scope, for it is surely one of the few common characteristics of the greatest novels, plays, and short stories that their total effect is complex and infinitely suggestive to the imagination. So far as any of them makes a 'point', the point carries with it several concomitant points, as a note of music carries overtones. Maugham's point-making may be contrasted with Bernard Shaw's avowal that he was powerless to control the actions of his characters according to plan.

The conception of a story, long or short, is only arbitrarily to be separated from the process of expressing it in words. While it remains an idea or complex of ideas in the mind, the story has no more than an adumbrated, vague, and incomplete existence. Skilful writing can never wholly compensate for an inferior conception : on the other hand, a conception of a quality higher than the merely effective is hardly to be lifted from its submerged and undefined origin in the subconscious without a delicate and flexible mastery of the resources of language. The shortcomings of Maugham's material are thus intimately connected with the shortcomings of his means of expression. He does not invent or create his own distinctive phrases by new arrangements of common words but picks them up from well-worn speech in ready-made bundles, and this inevitably means an immense loss of precision, freshness, and discernment. Meaning is only roughly indicated ; subtlety can be no more than simulated ; irony goes without its delicate insinuations ; and those melodies which words in sequence can play for the delight of the senses and imagination must



all be eschewed in favour of elementary tunes so familiar that the mind hardly notices them at all.

Before a full estimate of Maugham's achievement can be reached, it is necessary to remind ourselves that the characteristics of extroverted writing—artificiality, obviousness, informality—are quite legitimate in those media which are essentially extrovert; artificial comedy for the stage, 'magazine' stories whose function is to entertain the reader without disturbing his preconceptions, and light satire—satire, that is, which has neither strong indignation nor reforming purpose behind it. Maugham's most successful work is in these media, notably his stage comedies and his short stories.

As recently as 1947, in the preface to *Creatures of Circumstance*, he defended his own kind of story with some vigour.

Where the critics to my mind err is when they dismiss stories as magazine stories because they are well constructed, dramatic and have a surprise ending.

He proceeds to make an impressive indictment of the story which does not tell a story, which conveys a mood or an impression or an unorganized 'slice of life'. He holds Chekhov, in part at least, responsible, and adds:

The simple fact is that Chekhov believed what writers, being human, are very apt to believe, namely that what he was best able to do was the best thing to do.

It is surely a mistake, however, to claim for the 'magazine story' the same consideration as belongs to more profoundly experienced visions of reality on the grounds—which Maugham adopts in the Preface to *Altogether*—that Chekhov and Maupassant 'wrote stories at more or less regular intervals to earn their living. . . . All stories are magazine stories or newspaper stories.' The fallacy lies in the assumption that all magazines, or all newspapers, are much the same in literary quality.

Every creative artist, even the greatest, exercises his art



only within certain limits, and Somerset Maugham's disabilities in conception and in verbal expression have not prevented him from attaining outstanding and continued success in his chosen field. If the disabilities have been emphasized in this essay, it is for two good reasons, both of which can be justified from among his own pronouncements on the craft of writing.

First, the critic is under an obligation to establish, without fear or favour, the truth as he sees it, and on this point Maugham's comment (in the Preface to *Altogether*) on Chekhov is pertinent also to his own work : ' Not to recognize his imperfections, but rather to insist that they are excellencies, can in the long run only hurt his reputation.'

The second reason why attention must be drawn to Maugham's ' imperfections ' is that the critic is under a further obligation to scrutinize previous judgements passed by other critics, and among Maugham's works some, notably the short story, *Rain*, and the novels, *The Razor's Edge* and *Of Human Bondage*, have acquired from current criticism such a kudos that in popular esteem they are apt to rank as masterpieces. If the best must always be the enemy of the good, it is equally true that the good, extravagantly overpraised, may counter-attack disastrously, and throw values into confusion.

Maugham himself is much more modest than his most enthusiastic admirers. He lowers the temperature noticeably when he writes :

My native gifts are not remarkable, but I have a certain force of character which has enabled me in a measure to supplement my deficiencies. I have common sense. Most people cannot see anything, but I can see what is in front of my nose with extreme clearness ; the greatest writers can see through a brick wall. My vision is not so penetrating.

That is Maugham speaking from his conscious mind, and no man can be held personally responsible for what lies deeper than consciousness. In assessing a writer's work, however, the subconscious, through its effects, must always



be taken into account, especially where it seems to have directed the writer's aims. One reason why Maugham's 'imperfections' obtrude on the attention of a discriminating reader, in each of the three much praised works named above, is because a theme has been chosen which of its own nature makes demands the author is unable to meet. The theme in each case is a conflict of universal importance: in *Rain* it is between the spiritual and the sensual, in *Of Human Bondage* between the spiritual and the rational, and in *The Razor's Edge* between the spiritual and the materialist. *The Razor's Edge*, the most ambitious undertaking of Maugham's later period, seems indeed to invite, in the attributed though unrealized character of Larry, a comparison with Dostoievski's *The Idiot*—and the comparison, once begun, makes it quite clear that Maugham's place is not among the supreme masters.

He does, however, belong of right to that small and select company of contemporary writers whose best work, we may reasonably assume, will survive beyond their lifetime—and not merely because literary historians will record the strong impression he made on the literary scene throughout the first half of the twentieth century. His successful versatility in four distinct media—the novel, the play, the short story, the personal narrative—is not likely soon to be paralleled, and there is no reason to believe that his almost unique hold on the attention of both highbrow and lowbrow will soon be relaxed. It is there, perhaps, that his most distinctive achievement is to be located. Because of his readability, his knack of securing and retaining the interest of people, all over the world, who normally do not read or at best read trash, he is, especially through his short stories, a valuable popularizer. Judged by the highest standards, his conceptions may seem imperfect and his methods unsubtle, but their effectiveness for their purpose is beyond dispute. Himself the scourge of Christian missionaries, he is, nevertheless, like Kipling before him, a redoubtable missionary for the art of literature among the



unconverted who, but for him, would remain utterly uninterested and hostile.



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# SOMERSET MAUGHAM

## A

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The Cambridge University Press publish the 9th Annual Lecture of the National Book League, delivered by Somerset Maugham at the Kingsway Hall, London, on 24 October 1951, in *The Writer's Point of View*, price 3s. net.



## INDEX OF SHORT STORIES AND SKETCHES

(The title in brackets indicates the volume title.)

- Adios (*The Land of the Blessed Virgin*)  
Alcazar, The (*The Land of the Blessed Virgin*)  
Alhambra, The (*The Land of the Blessed Virgin*)  
Alien Corn (*First Person Singular, The Round Dozen, Quartet*)  
Altar of Heaven, The (*On a Chinese Screen*)  
Ant and the Grasshopper, The (*Cosmopolitans, Here and There*)  
Appearance and Reality (*Creatures of Circumstance, Here and There*)  
Arabesque (*On a Chinese Screen*)  
  
Back of Beyond, The (*Ah King*)  
Bad Example (*Orientations*)  
Beast of Burden, The (*On a Chinese Screen*)  
Before the Bull-Fight (*The Land of the Blessed Virgin*)  
Before the Party (*The Casuarina Tree*)  
Behind the Scenes (*Ashenden*)  
Boabdil the Unlucky (*The Land of the Blessed Virgin*)  
Book Bag, The (*Ah King*)  
Bridge of Calahorra, The (*The Land of the Blessed Virgin*)  
Bum, The (*Cosmopolitans*)  
By the Road (*The Land of the Blessed Virgin*)  
  
Cabinet Minister, The (*On a Chinese Screen*)  
Cadiz (*The Land of the Blessed Virgin*)  
Calle de la Sierpes (*The Land of the Blessed Virgin*)  
Casual Affair, A (*Creatures of Circumstance*)  
Cathedral of Seville, The (*The Land of the Blessed Virgin*)  
Chance Acquaintance, A (*Ashenden*)  
Characteristics (*The Land of the Blessed Virgin*)  
Choice of Amyntas (*Orientations*)  
Churches of Ronda, The (*The Land of the Blessed Virgin*)  
City Built on a Rock, A (*On a Chinese Screen*)  
Closed Shop, The (*Cosmopolitans*)  
Colonel's Lady, The (*Creatures of Circumstance, Quartet*)



- Consul, The (*On a Chinese Screen*)  
Cordova (*The Land of the Blessed Virgin*)  
Corrida des Toros (*The Land of the Blessed Virgin*)  
Court of Oranges, The (*The Land of the Blessed Virgin*)  
Creative Impulse, The (*First Person Singular, The Round Dozen*)  
Daisy (*Orientations*)  
Dance, The (*The Land of the Blessed Virgin*)  
Dark Woman, The (*Ashenden*)  
Dawn (*On a Chinese Screen*)  
De Amicitia (*Orientations*)  
Democracy (*On a Chinese Screen*)  
Dining-Room, The (*On a Chinese Screen*)  
Dinner Parties (*On a Chinese Screen*)  
Domicilliary Visit, A (*Ashenden*)  
Don Juan Tenorio (*The Land of the Blessed Virgin*)  
Door of Opportunity, The (*Ah King, The Round Dozen*)  
Dream, The (*Cosmopolitans*)  
Dr. MacAlister (*On a Chinese Screen*)  
Ecija (*The Land of the Blessed Virgin*)  
El Genero Chico (*The Land of the Blessed Virgin*)  
End of the Flight, The (*Cosmopolitans, Here and There*)  
Envoi (*The Trembling of a Leaf*)  
Episode (*Creatures of Circumstance, Here and There*)  
Escape, The (*Cosmopolitans*)  
Facts of Life, The (*The Mixture As Before, Here and There, Quartet*)  
Failure (*On a Chinese Screen*)  
Faith (*Orientations*)  
Fall of Edward Barnard, The (*The Trembling of a Leaf*)  
Fannings, The (*On a Chinese Screen*)  
Fear (*On a Chinese Screen*)  
Feast Day, A (*The Land of the Blessed Virgin*)  
Flip of a Coin, The (*Ashenden*)



- Flotsam and Jetsam (*Creatures of Circumstance, Here and There*)  
Footprints in the Jungle (*Ah King*)  
Force of Circumstances, The (*The Casuarina Tree, The Round Dozen*)  
Four Dutchmen, The (*Cosmopolitans*)  
Fragment, The (*On a Chinese Screen*)  
French Joe (*Cosmopolitans*)  
Friend in Need, A (*Cosmopolitans*)
- Game of Billiards, A (*On a Chinese Screen*)  
Gaol (*The Land of the Blessed Virgin*)  
German Harry (*Cosmopolitans*)  
Gigolo and Gigolette (*The Mixture As Before, Here and There*)  
Giralda, The (*The Land of the Blessed Virgin*)  
Glory Hole, The (*On a Chinese Screen*)  
God's Truth (*On a Chinese Screen*)  
Granada (*The Land of the Blessed Virgin*)  
Grand Style, The (*On a Chinese Screen*)  
Greek, The (*Ashenden*)  
Guilia Lazzari (*Ashenden*)  
Gustav (*Ashenden*)
- Hairless Mexican, The (*Ashenden*)  
Happy Couple, The (*Creatures of Circumstance*)  
Happy Man, The (*Cosmopolitans, Here and There*)  
Henderson (*On a Chinese Screen*)  
Her Britannic Majesty's Representative (*On a Chinese Screen*)  
His Excellency (*Ashenden*)  
Home (*Cosmopolitans, Here and There*)  
Honolulu (*The Trembling of a Leaf*)  
Hospital of Charity, The (*The Land of the Blessed Virgin*)  
Human Element, The (*First Person Singular*)
- In a Strange Land (*Cosmopolitans, Here and There*)  
Inn, The (*On a Chinese Screen*)



- Jane (*First Person Singular, The Round Dozen*)  
 Jerez (*The Land of the Blessed Virgin*)  
 Judgement Seat, The (*Cosmopolitans*)
- Kite, The (*Creatures of Circumstance, Quartet*)
- Last Chance, The (*On a Chinese Screen*)  
 Letter, The (*The Casuarina Tree, The Round Dozen*)  
 Libation to the Gods, A (*On a Chinese Screen*)  
 Lights of the Town, The (*On a Chinese Screen*)  
 Lion's Skin, The (*The Mixture As Before*)  
 Lord Mountdrago (*The Mixture As Before, Here and There*)  
 Los Pobres (*The Land of the Blessed Virgin*)  
 Lotus Eater, The (*The Mixture As Before, Here and There*)  
 Louise (*Cosmopolitans, Here and There*)  
 Love and Russian Literature (*Ashenden*)  
 Luncheon, The (*Cosmopolitans, Here and There*)
- Mackintosh (*The Trembling of a Leaf*)  
 Man from Glasgow, A (*Creatures of Circumstance*)  
 Man with a Conscience, A (*The Mixture As Before*)  
 Man with the Scar, The (*Cosmopolitans, Here and There*)  
 Mayhew (*Cosmopolitans*)  
 Medinat Az-Zahra (*The Land of the Blessed Virgin*)  
 Metempsychosis (*On a Chinese Screen*)  
 Mirage (*On a Chinese Screen*)  
 Miss King (*Ashenden*)  
 Missionary Lady, The (*On a Chinese Screen*)  
 Mongol Chief, The (*On a Chinese Screen*)  
 Mosque, The (*The Land of the Blessed Virgin*)  
 Mother, The (*Creatures of Circumstance*)  
 Mr. Harrington's Washing (*Ashenden, The Round Dozen*)  
 Mr. Knowall (*Cosmopolitans, Trio*)  
 My Lady's Parlour (*On a Chinese Screen*)



Neil MacAdam (*Ah King, The Round Dozen*)

Nightfall (*On a Chinese Screen*)

Normal Man, The (*On a Chinese Screen*)

Nun, The (*On a Chinese Screen*)

Official Position, An (*The Mixture As Before, Here and There*)

Old Timer, The (*On a Chinese Screen*)

On Horseback (*The Land of the Blessed Virgin*)

One of the Best (*On a Chinese Screen*)

Opium Den, The (*On a Chinese Screen*)

Outstation, The (*The Casuarina Tree, The Round Dozen*)

Pacific, The (*The Trembling of a Leaf*)

'P. & O.' (*The Casuarina Tree*)

Peurta del Peunte (*The Land of the Blessed Virgin*)

Philosopher, The (*On a Chinese Screen*)

Picture, The (*On a Chinese Screen*)

Plain, The (*On a Chinese Screen*)

Poet, The (*Cosmopolitans*)

Point of Honour, The (*On a Chinese Screen, Creatures of Circumstance*)

Pool, The (*The Trembling of a Leaf*)

Portrait of a Gentleman, The (*Cosmopolitans*)

Promise, The (*Cosmopolitans*)

Punctiliousness of Don Sebastian, The (*Orientations*)

Question, The (*On a Chinese Screen*)

Rain (*On a Chinese Screen, The Trembling of a Leaf, The Round Dozen*)

Raw Material (*Cosmopolitans*)

Red (*The Trembling of a Leaf*)

Rising of the Curtain, The (*On a Chinese Screen*)

Road, The (*On a Chinese Screen*)

Rolling Stone, The (*On a Chinese Screen*)



- Romance (*On a Chinese Screen*)  
Romantic Young Lady, The (*Creatures of Circumstance*)  
Ronda (*The Land of the Blessed Virgin*)  
Round Dozen, The (*First Person Singular, The Round Dozen*)
- Salvatore (*Cosmopolitans, Here and There*)  
Sanatorium (*Creatures of Circumstance, Here and There, Trio*)  
Sea-Dog, The (*On a Chinese Screen*)  
Servants of God, The (*On a Chinese Screen*)  
Seventh Day Adventist, The (*On a Chinese Screen*)  
Seville (*The Land of the Blessed Virgin*)  
Sinologue, The (*On a Chinese Screen*)  
Skipper, The (*On a Chinese Screen*)  
Social Sense, The (*Cosmopolitans, Here and There*)  
Song, The (*The Land of the Blessed Virgin*)  
Song of the River, The (*On a Chinese Screen*)  
Spirit of Andalusia, The (*The Land of the Blessed Virgin*)  
Straight Flush (*Cosmopolitans*)  
Stranger, The (*On a Chinese Screen*)  
String of Beads, A (*Cosmopolitans, Here and There*)  
Stripling, The (*On a Chinese Screen*)  
Student of Drama, A (*On a Chinese Screen*)  
Sullivan (*On a Chinese Screen*)  
Swineherd, The (*The Land of the Blessed Virgin*)
- Taipon, The (*On a Chinese Screen*)  
Three Fat Women of Antibes, The (*The Mixture As Before, Here and There*)  
Traitor, The (*Ashenden*)  
Treasure, The (*The Mixture As Before*)  
Trip to Paris, A (*Ashenden*)  
Two Villages (*The Land of the Blessed Virgin*)
- Unconquered, The (*Creatures of Circumstance, Here and There*)



Verger, The (*Cosmopolitans, Here and There, Trio*)  
 Vessel of Wrath, The (*Ah King, The Round Dozen*)  
 Vice-Consul, The (*On a Chinese Screen*)  
 Virtue (*First Person Singular*)  
 Voice of the Turtle, The (*The Mixture As Before*)  
  
 Wash-Tub, The (*Cosmopolitans*)  
 Wind and Storm (*The Land of the Blessed Virgin*)  
 Winter Cruise (*Creatures of Circumstance, Here and There*)  
 Woman of Fifty, A (*Creatures of Circumstance*)  
 Women of Andalusia (*The Land of the Blessed Virgin*)  
  
 Yellow Streak, The (*The Casuarina Tree*)

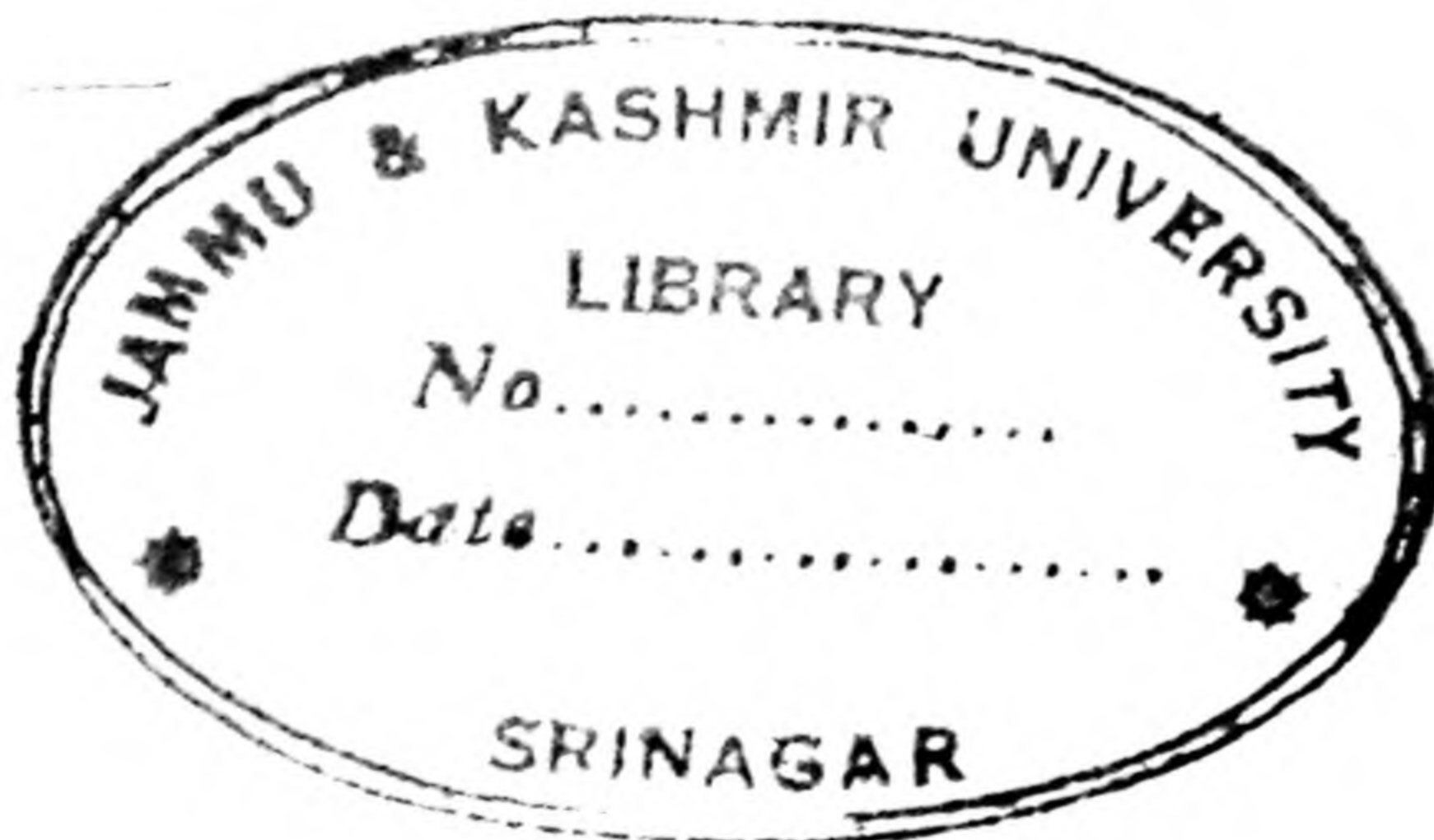
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